



Joint Senior Enlisted Public Affairs Course

010-13

29 Oct – 14 Nov 2012

Tips for PA Types

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<http://www.usmccca.org/archives/6447>

Getting off to a Good Start in Your Initial Public Affairs Assignment

Recently during an ice breaker for our Public Affairs Qualification Course (PAQC) here at the Defense Information School (DINFOS), I was approached by a Captain who seemed to display a bit of anxiety regarding his first assignment as a Public Affairs Officer. He expressed concern about his initial meeting with his new boss. He was concerned with making a good impression during the meeting, and he also wanted to set the right tone for becoming a valued member of the staff going forward. I remember his precise words to me, "sir, I just want to make an impact and ensure that my new boss listens to me and appreciates what Public Affairs can do for the mission."

This young officer looked me squarely in the eye, and anxiously awaited my response. This was not a question I'd entertained before, however I reflected upon my previous experiences, and offered him some tips to consider:

1. Do your homework and speak with confidence during your initial meeting with your new boss.

As a graduate of the Defense Information School, you'll have received all the Service directed training and skill sets necessary to hit the ground running and be effective as you begin your Public Affairs career. One should approach the initial meeting with the new boss with confidence. As soon as you know your follow-on assignment, take the time to read all you can about your new unit. Google the commander, find out about his/her military and civilian background. Do the same for your units and sub-units, learn about current operations, demographics, recent and future deployments, the history of the unit, etc.

Talk to the outgoing PAO, pick his or her brain regarding the communications environment; their relationship with the commander, relationship with the staff, and relationships with the local and regional media. Ask them what worked well in terms of working with the commander and the staff, and what areas they wish they could have experienced more success in.

Seek out the advice and counsel of the senior NCOs in the PA office. They are seasoned professionals who will provide invaluable counsel regarding command relationships and the communications environment. It's also important to engage early and develop a good working relationship with the commander's Sergeant Major or Senior Enlisted Advisor. He or she will have their finger on the pulse of the troops and will have information on the command's critical issues.

Engage early with the commander's immediate staff. Prior to meeting with the commander, meet with the staff (Ops, Exec, Plans, SJA, etc.) and have an initial discussion regarding how PA is currently integrated into operations. Developing solid relationships with the staff based on trust and competence will also ensure PA is brought into the conversation early regarding the units operations and communication opportunities.

Know this going into any new assignment. There is going to be a period of testing of you and your advice to the commander and staff. You are the unknown quantity coming into a staff that has at least some time together. It is normal for them to initially observe closely what you have to say and what actions you take. Remember, first impressions are important and they are lasting.

2. Organize your thoughts before going into the meeting.

It's important to organize your thoughts before going into the meeting. You don't need to memorize a script, but have a keen understanding for what you want to convey and accomplish during the meeting. In doing so you'll significantly reduce any stress or nervousness which might affect your ability to articulate clearly and make a good initial impression.

After the initial introductions, but early in the conversation, ensure you address with your new boss what his or her expectations are regarding Public Affairs. Ask the commander what his/her priorities are. If a PAO is working on something that doesn't directly tie back to or support one of the commander's priorities, it might not be worth doing. Understanding the boss' priorities and making sure all communication efforts are tied to those priorities is critical.



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You should convey that you are excited to be a member of the unit, with its storied history, and you are committed to working with the staff to tell the stories about the great men and women in uniform, the outstanding civilians and contractors, and the great work they do on behalf of the American people.

Don't forget to listen carefully to what the commander is saying. There can be subtle nuances to what is being said and how the boss wants to operate. Listen to the tone when speaking of the media, community outreach and internal information. Those can be key indicators of where your focus will be and how the commander will interact with you and your staff.

3. Get buy in from your boss during the initial meeting regarding the evolution of your command relationship.

Convey to your boss you want to be a highly valued member of the staff. You're going to work hard to effectively communicate to various audiences regarding unit operations and the outstanding personnel who conduct them.

Part of getting buy in from the boss is to know your craft stemming from your basic branch to public affairs. If this is your first assignment as a public affairs officer, the commander knows that you are in your initial entry position and you are not coming to him or her with vast amounts of experience. That will come with time, but in that time, ensure the commander knows that you have done your research, talked to other Public Affairs Officers/NCOs and sought out a current or past senior public affairs officer as a mentor to help guide you through the rough waters of the career field and your new profession.

During his frequent visits to talk with DINFOS students attending PAQC, the Chief of Naval Information, Admiral John Kirby, speaks about the process of PAOs becoming trusted advisors to their commanders. One should seek to be involved in decisions that go beyond PA, and seek to provide input and counsel across the spectrum.

In my initial Public Affairs assignment, I told my boss I would work hard to become a trusted member of his staff. I told him there might be a time when I'd need to come to him on a breaking news issue and provide counsel on how to communicate in the midst of a crisis. I also told him in that initial meeting I would work hard in the interim to ensure I developed the trust and confidence of himself and his immediate staff. He welcomed my comments, and I believe the seeds of a fruitful relationship were sown in the initial meeting.

4. Be Yourself

In one's quest to be a great PAO, and have a smooth transition onto a seasoned staff, it's vitally important to remember to be yourself. This concept feeds into the idea of being a trusted advisor. The commander might be a dynamic personality that unknowingly drives the staff toward group think. The pressure of being the most junior person on the staff may drive the PAO toward sacrificing his/her personal beliefs for the opinion of the boss. The PAO – almost more than anyone – needs to be rock solid entrenched in his/her beliefs. The PAO should stay committed to those beliefs and don't be afraid to push back and provide advice and counsel which might question assumptions and decisions. The commander needs a stable of confident advisors, and will appreciate your steadfast professionalism.

The vast majority of Commanders from all Services not only have experience with the media, but have also served on staffs with seasoned Public Affairs officers. Commanders understand the value of effective communications, and will welcome the addition of Public Affairs professionals onto their staffs. They will be more than willing to work with aggressive and dedicated PA professionals to ensure that their units communication plans and strategies are dynamic and successful in engaging various audiences.

Never forget that in the end you are a staff officer that can be a huge multiplier whether in combat, training or back at home station. The commander will set the tone, provide the intent and guidance, and will set your left and right limits. It will be up to the PAO to effectively operate within those limits providing the best advice and counsel one can.

Note: The following members of the DINFOS Staff contributed to this article: Lt Col Will Manley, Deputy Commandant, LTC Rod Cunningham, Director of Training, Commander John Schofield, Instructor in Public Affairs Leadership Department, and Navy Element Commander, Jim Gilbert (CSM Ret.), Deputy Director of Training, Major Brus Vidal, Director of Advanced Studies, Public Affairs Leadership Department, and Steven Boylan (COL Ret.), Assistant Professor, Department of Command & Leadership, Ft. Leavenworth, KS.